WASHINGTON POST
8 JUL 1971

P-Wilson, George C.
P-Trewhitt, Henry L.
Soc.4.01.2 McNamara
Soc.4.01.1 New York Times

The McNamara Years

Books

McNAMARA. By Henry L. Trewhitt.
(Harper & Row, 307 pp., $7.95)

Reviewed by
George C. Wilson

The reviewer, as a military writer for The Washington Post, covered McNamara's tenure at the Pentagon. He is also author of a book, "Bridge of No Return," on the capture of the U.S.S. Pueblo.

As the propeller-driven transport bucked eastward through the night and into the next day, the questioner could not resist asking Navy Secretary John H. Chafee why he had left the comparative ease of his Pentagon office for the grueling trip he had just completed on the West Coast.

"Because," Chafee said with earnestness, "I get terrified every time I think of a smart guy like McNamara ending up with a half-million men on the ground in Vietnam without knowing how they got there. I have to get out and see things for myself."

Just how and why a smart guy like former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara did indeed let that happen is one of the intriguing questions running through the post-mortems on the fatal Vietnam policy of the 1960s—fatal, anyhow, for some 50,000 Americans who died in battle and uncounted thousands of Asians, many of them civilians, whom the policy makers went to war to save.

In hopes of finding the answer, many students of the Vietnam war no doubt will turn to Henry L. Trewhitt's book, "McNamara." He watched the Defense Secretary as a reporter—first for The Baltimore Sun and then Newsweek—and interviewed him at length after McNamara had left the Pentagon. But the reader will not find the answer in this book—only some more evidence. McNamara himself is nowhere directly quoted on how and why he went wrong on Vietnam. So the definitive explanation must await his own report, or perhaps a Barbara Tuchman-type treatment of his personal papers.

Also, through the accident of timing, the Pentagon Papers became public property after Mr. Trewhitt had written his eminently fair account of McNamara's stewardship of the Pentagon. Those papers would have buttressed the book.

But that is not telling what is in this book—only what no doubt will be in the next one on the Defense Secretary who served Presidents Kennedy and Johnson from 1961 until he was fired with distinction in 1967—enough distinction to stay on the job until the end of February, 1968. What *is* in the book is a dispassionate review of those McNamara years—overly dispassionate perhaps, since the prose seldom manages to pull the reader inside McNamara, the man, and let him share the agony and ecstacy.

"He was a creature of towering accomplishment and substantial failure," author Trewhitt tells us in typically even-handed fashion after taking us from McNamara's reorganization of the Pentagon, through the follies of the TFX and finally to his backing away from the Vietnam war he helped lead the nation into. About one-third of the 307-page book is devoted to the war.

Discussing Vietnam specifically, Trewhitt writes: "At the end as at the beginning, McNamara accepted the underlying premise of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. Vietnam was an aspect of global rivalry, with freedom from externally imposed Communist rule as the local objective. It was a place for the application of the latest theories of limited war, uniting political, economic and military components. But as it worked out, the undertaking in Vietnam unquestionably was a failure as it applied uniquely to Robert McNamara. . .

"McNamara had overestimated the efficacy of U.S. power, and he had grossly underestimated the will of the enemy. All the military criticisms of him were incorporated in the remark of a senior commander: 'He gave us enough to deny success to the enemy. He did not give us enough to make the enemy stop trying.' "

The book leaves the reader wondering how McNamara—the man who made the bloody "body count" a yardstick for military progress in Vietnam—would respond to the moral backlash to the war now cracking through the land. To Mylai. To the civilian casualties documented, ironically enough, by one of his friends—Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.). We are reminded of McNamara's past moralizing, like in the Montreal speech, but not of how he squares it with the results in Vietnam. War demonstrators in the past have posed the question to him by occasionally hurling missiles through the windows of the World Bank—the institution McNamara now heads.

"What a splendid time it would have been," Trewhitt writes in his final line on McNamara, "without Vietnam." And—with forgiveness for such flawed McNamara projects as the TFX and C-5A aircraft—it might have been splendid—given his potential contribution to world arms control.

As it is, McNamara must be credited with giving the world a crash course in the limited political power of nuclear weapons. His efforts just might keep the world from killing itself with the same mad weapons McNamara helped bring into being—the MIRV offense and ABM defense, to name two. "His crowning accomplishment," Trewhitt has decided after his careful study of McNamara, "could be simply put: he had caused the world, more than just the narrow circle of American strategists, to look at nuclear weapons with thought, rather than instinct or emotion."